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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 002443

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SA](#) [ZI](#)

SUBJECT: MBEKI VISIT REKINDLES TALKS ON TALKS

REF: (A) HARARE 2364 (B) HARARE 2313 (C) HARARE 2259

(D) HARARE 2124

Classified By: Political Officer Win Dayton under Section 1.5(b)(d)

1. (C) MDC Secretary for Presidential Affairs Gandhi Mudzingwa on December 19 briefed polloff on South African President Mbeki's 20-minute December 18 meeting with MDC President Morgan Tsvangirai and Secretary General Welshman Ncube. According to Mudzingwa, Mbeki told the party leaders at the end of his visit to Harare that President Mugabe had surprised him by admitting that he was unaware of details on how far informal intra-party talks had progressed. Mugabe added that, regardless of the progress of such talks, it was time to wrap them up and to proceed to a formal dialogue between the parties. Gandhi reported that Ncube was to meet at a yet-to-be-determined date with Minister of Legal, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Patrick Chinamasa to work out an agenda and timetable for formal talks. Gandhi would not predict when formal talks would start, if ever, noting that ZANU-PF had raised false expectations on talks before. Without a date certain or confidence-building measures from ZANU-PF, the MDC would have to remain skeptical on ruling party intentions. He credited international and domestic pressure with Mbeki's visit, which he characterized as potentially constructive.

2. (C) Government-controlled media, which subordinated coverage of the Mbeki visit to the Reserve Bank's monetary policy announcement (septel), highlighted historical ties between the ANC and ZANU-PF and Mbeki's remarks on the countries' shared problems. Mugabe publicly stated that informal inter-party dialogue was ongoing but he could "not say accurately where we are". He said he awaited reports from ruling party participants in the talks and that the parties could move to formal dialogue "at some stage". The government media noted that Mbeki met briefly with Tsvangirai and Ncube. MDC Spokesman Paul Themba Nyati publicly stated that the Mbeki visit yielded no new initiatives.

3. (C) COMMENT: If Mbeki's report to the MDC is true, Mugabe is keeping to historical form: with dwindling options and his back to the wall, he indicates tentative agreement to commence to begin to start discussions that theoretically could lead to real concessions. The setting of an agenda (notwithstanding numerous prior exchanges on the matter) and other intervening developments may yet complicate the setting of a date for formal dialogue. Mugabe's sensitivity to international pressure in the wake of the beating his ego suffered in the recent CHOGM debacle could be a further complicating factor. Hardline opponents of dialogue, who appeared to have the upper hand at ZANU-PF's recent party conference (ref A), can be expected to disrupt progress toward talks through their control of the state media. Although heated rhetoric and atmospherics at the party conference appeared to squelch prospects for intra-party dialogue, some elements of the party are quietly supportive. In any event, neither supporters nor opponents of dialogue within the party can be expected to get too far out in front of their very engaged leader.

4. (C) COMMENT (CONT'D): Mbeki's visit and Mugabe's tentative indication on formal talks may forestall MDC preparations for mass action early next year (ref B). Elements of civil society nonetheless may continue to agitate against the government independent of MDC influence, potentially upsetting the environment for dialogue. At the MDC's annual conference December 20-21, the party leadership likely will face some pressure from a restive rank-and-file leery of talks, but can be expected to continue its commitment to pursue intra-party dialogue unconditionally.

5. (C) COMMENT (CONT'D): President Mbeki's role and motives will be closely scrutinized by all in Harare. His well-publicized statement warning of human rights as a pretext to effect regime change shocked many in the opposition and civil society here and was trumpeted to considerable advantage by the government press. Both parties are keenly aware of the conflicting demands Zimbabwe imposes

on him in domestic, regional and international political contexts. For now, maintaining Mbeki's engagement is a sine qua non to prospects for the long elusive formal intra-party dialogue; both parties recognize the need to play ball as long as he does. Indeed, meaningful engagement by ZANU-PF beyond merely coming to the table likely will require sustained and perhaps more forceful pressure by Mbeki.

SULLIVAN